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Creativity and Cultural Globalisation in Suburbia: Mediating the Perth-Singapore 'Network'

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Abstract

According to Singapore-based academics Randolph Kluver and Wayne Fu, there is a need to seek out cultural proxy signifiers “which indicate the extent to which beliefs and values are moving across national boundaries” (Kluver and Fu 2004). This paper examines how Singaporeans who have settled in the Western Australian city of Perth – which houses the largest single concentration of Singaporeans outside Singapore, to the extent that it has been dubbed ‘Singaperth’ by *The Straits Times* (Long 2003a; 2003b) – reconnect with Singapore culturally in and through their creative pursuits. The motivations and thoughts of three Perth-based Singaporeans who belong to the ‘creative class’ (Florida 2002), and who continue to relate to Singapore in their work and cultural activities, are presented and analysed. Using these three respondents as ‘proxies’, this paper considers the extent which Perth might be seen as a creative suburb of Singapore where cultural globalisation entails the embrace of the new creative and cultural ‘network’, one which enables these ‘Singaperthians’ to enjoy their ‘new’ suburban home, yet gives them autonomy to selectively, albeit consciously, mediate their diasporic ‘homeland’ and cultural ‘centre’ identities.

Biography

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INTRODUCTION: GLOBALISING SINGAPORE

It is important to realize that cultural globalization is no longer conceptualized in terms of the emergence of a homogenized global culture corresponding to Marshall McLuhan's global village. Instead, cultural globalization is recognized as a complex and diverse phenomenon consisting of global cultures originating from many different nations and regions (Crane 2002: 1)

Singapore was declared the most globalised economy in 2000 and 2004 by US-based consultancy firm A. T. Kearney in conjunction with American think-tank magazine *Foreign Policy* to develop the world's first Globalization Index (A. T. Kearney 2001; 2005). This index, which evaluates levels of global integration in a wide selection of advanced economies and emerging markets worldwide, was created to quantify what has arguably become a buzzword of the twenty-first century (A. T. Kearney 2002: 40). The four broad indicators used to measure globalisation range from technological connectedness, political engagement, trade and economic integration to the extent of personal contact across borders (ibid.). Singapore received the highest accolade in 2000 – a position it regained in 2004 after losing the top spot to Ireland for three consecutive years from 2001 to 2003 inclusive – due primarily to its willingness to embrace a more open economy, its nimbleness in economic and financial policies, as well as its advances and versatility in information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Leo and Lee 2004: 214).

Although new variables have been added to the Globalization Index since 2001 to improve the accuracy of collectable data, one aspect of globalisation remains unaccounted for by the index: that is, culture or, indeed, cultural globalisation. As A.T Kearney revealed in its 2002 report:

Cultural exchange has undoubtedly grown in tandem with the movement of people and ideas across borders and with the growing use of communications technology, but little accurate data are available. For instance, statistics on trade flows in music or books might show a country's comparative advantages in manufacturing these products, such as CDs and technical manuals, but would not reveal whether the goods reflect the ideas and culture of the exporting nation. Consequently, cultural trends are not included in this index (A. T. Kearney 2002: 41).

It is worth noting that cultural globalisation, understood at this juncture as cross-border "cultural exchange", is inextricably linked to "the movement of people and ideas" as well as the increased permeation of "communications technology" (ibid.). While it is possible to track the movements of people, it is impossible to trace or pinpoint the origins of ideas, especially those pertaining to the aesthetic and creative realm. Yet these factors are of paramount importance if one accepts that the contemporary global economy is transiting rapidly from the age of information and knowledge into a 'creative economy' (Florida 2002, Howkins 2001).

According to Richard Florida, one of the key proponents of the inevitability of this cultural shift, the creative economy is increasingly dependent on individuated innovation and creativity (Leo and Lee 2004: 209). While such innovative and creative individuals can be referred to as 'creative workers', Florida (2002) prefers to call them the 'creative class' as their specialist nature or their work, leisurely pursuits and resulting intellectual property spin-offs are expected to redefine society in new and creative ways (see Lee and Lim 2004). As Howkins (2001) also notes more cogently within the subtitle of his best-selling book, a creative economy is one where people, as individuals, can effectively make money from their creative ideas.

Significant to this paper, Florida makes the case that such creative individuals are no longer bound to specific locales and are thus free to 'take flight' and (re)settle anywhere in the world (Florida 2005). Such global flows of people, described by Arjun Appadurai as the "ethnoscape", have led to the development of what is now commonly known as transnational or diasporic networks (Appadurai, 1996: 33). Although the number of Singaporean 'diasporas' – estimated at 100,000 to 150,000 (Koh 2005: 86) – is small by global standards, it is considered rather sizeable relative to its miniscule population of about 4 million, of which only 3 million are citizens. With an already small talent pool to service an economy that is increasingly globally-oriented, this dispersal or deterritorialisation of Singaporeans, one of the more theorised aspect of cultural globalisation (see *inter alia* Appadurai, 1996; and, Tomlinson, 1997 and 1999), may pose a direct threat to the sustenance of Singapore's 'most global' status, at least on the labour front. But by the same token, the spread of Singaporeans to different parts of the world

“can assist Singapore’s internationalisation effort” and thus increase its global reach (Yap, 1991: 4).

While in the not too distant past, emigrants to ‘greener pastures’ were heavily criticised for deserting their homeland, the advent of the globalisation era, particularly from the late 1980s and into the 1990s, has caused the official tune in Singapore to change somewhat. As Yap enunciates in a landmark study of Singaporean emigrants in Australia and Canada:

A more recent perspective sees the overseas communities as a resource rather than a loss to the country of origin in view of their potential contribution to the country’s globalization strategy (Yap, 1991: 47)

Nevertheless, the expressed interest in tapping the resources of the Singaporean diasporic community has an uneasy element to it, especially when questions pertaining to Singaporean culture and identity – or the lack thereof – are raised (Koh 2005: 77). As recently as the 2002 National Day Rally speech, former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong used the term ‘quitter’ to denigrate “fair-weather Singaporeans who, having benefited from Singapore, will pack their bags and take flight” overseas when Singapore “runs into stormy weather” (Goh 2002). This description was made in contradistinction with ‘stayers’, the majority who prefer to etch out a living, however difficult, in the geographical confines of Singapore. But to avoid negating the professed advantages of ‘cosmopolitanism’ – a cultural-political discourse which found global circulation in the 1990s – Prime Minister Goh was careful to point out that:

‘Stayers’ include Singaporeans who are overseas, but feel for Singapore. They will come back when needed, because their hearts are here. The Singapore nation is not just those of us living here, but also the thousands of loyal Singaporeans who live around the world (Goh 2002).

The act of thinking about one’s allegiance to Singapore makes the entire polemical discourse of Singaporean ‘quitters’ versus ‘stayers’ culturally symbolic and to some degree irrelevant, especially for those who are not members of the so-called ‘creative class’, and are therefore are not able to fully embrace a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Even for those who have emigrated or are planning to do so in the future, these labels carry little or no weight in their decisions to live outside of Singapore. A lively debate ensued nevertheless, with some Singaporeans overseas critical of the ‘quitter’ label while those

resident in Singapore either sympathetic of the government's 'brain-drain' quandary or dismissive of the entire discourse on the ground that Singapore is too young a nation for people to have deep-seated emotions and attachments (see Koh 2003). What is most significant about this simplistic dichotomy is that the notion of national cum cultural rootedness and the extent of cultural globalisation among Singaporeans are, to borrow Benedict Anderson's conceptualisation (1983), 'imagined' entities that cannot be quantitatively measured. As the Prime Minister himself alluded to in his speech, just as there are Singaporeans living in Singapore who could be quitters at heart, there are stayers among the diasporic Singaporean community (Goh 2002).

In February 2004, Singapore-based academics Randolph Kluver and Wayne Fu published a report for *Foreign Policy* in which they took on the challenge of creating a 'cultural globalisation index'. Although Kluver and Fu (2004) acknowledge that it is "extraordinarily difficult to measure the global spread of ideas and trends", they propose an innovative way to gauge the extent of cultural globalisation in 20 countries. According to them, it is possible to "get a hint of a country's level of cultural integration" by identifying what they call 'cultural proxies', or "the conduits by which ideas, beliefs, and values are transmitted" (Kluver and Fu. 2004). The import and export of popular media products, including books, periodicals, and newspapers, were identified as having most impact and thus used as key indicators. Based on 1997 data on cultural trade sourced from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), Singapore emerged as the most culturally globalised country (ibid.). Among other things, the findings of the inaugural cultural globalisation index illustrate that there are much in common between the 'hard' and 'soft' indicators of globalisation, with the former covering economic, political and technological globalisation, as employed in the original globalisation index, and the latter on cultural globalisation.

Regardless of whether one accepts the veracity of globalisation data or indices, there is little doubt that Singaporeans have a strong tendency to embrace the many facets of globalisation: from being avid travellers to active users of the Internet and other communication technologies and so on (see Lee 2002). In many ways, this state of affairs is necessarily caused by its "smallness" (Yap, 1991: 40), which in turn places appreciable limits on the educational, occupational, cultural and, indeed, creative choices of

Singaporeans. As mentioned above, and as documented by Yap (1991), Sullivan and Gunasekaran (1994), and Da Cunha (1997), many Singaporeans have opted to go 'truly global' by resettling elsewhere. Such moves have the unique effect of embodying and appropriating the economic, political, technological and cultural aspects of globalisation all at once.

While it would be interesting to study the influence of globalisation on Singaporean emigrants, this paper carries a different agenda. It aims to rethink the notion of cultural globalisation by looking at how and why some Singaporean overseas continue to engage with Singapore and its creative cum cultural practices.¹ In particular, this paper examines how Singaporeans who have settled in the largely suburbanised Perth – the capital of Western Australia which houses the largest single concentration of Singaporeans outside Singapore, to the extent that it has been dubbed 'Singaperth' by *The Straits Times* (Long 2003a and 2003b) – reconnect with Singapore culturally and through their creative talents and works, and thus contribute to the formation of a 'cultural network' model of cultural globalisation (Crane 2002: 7). The motivations and mentalities of three Perth-based Singaporeans, nicknamed 'Singaperthians' by senior *Straits Times* journalist Susan Long (2003a), who would fit into Florida's (2003) category of the 'creative class', and who continue to do work in relation to Singapore, will be analysed and presented in the sections that follow.

RESEARCH AND INTERVIEW NOTES

Five recent Singaporean emigrants to Perth were identified for the purposes of this research. Of these five, three were selected for face-to-face interviews on the bases of their creative works and/or cultural activities as well as their availability. In appropriating Kluver and Fu's (2004) contention that it is useful, and oftentimes necessary, to seek out cultural proxy signifiers "which indicate the extent to which beliefs and values are moving across national boundaries", these three 'Singaperthians' were perceived to be

¹ One of the interview questions I posed to my respondents is: "Why do you (or Singaporeans) leave home physically (or emigrate) and then decide not to 'leave' by re-engaging with Singapore culturally and creatively through your work?" Actual responses to the question will be discussed in the forthcoming sections of this paper.

capable of acting as 'proxies' for other likeminded creative emigrants because the nature of their work and cultural interests relate unmistakably to Singapore.

In undertaking this research, the paper considers the extent to which Perth might be seen as a 'new frontier' for these Singaporeans to strut their 'creative stuff'; and where cultural globalisation entails the embrace of a new 'cultural network' (Crane 2002: 7). Although this 'cultural network' model of cultural globalisation is heavily influenced by Appadurai's (1996: 46-7) well-cited theory of global cultural hybridisation predicated on disjunctive flows of people, capital, technology, media and cultural products, Crane sees the increasing array of media and cultural 'centres' of productions in various parts of the world as evidence pointing to the formation of a new cultural network of flows (Crane 2002: 3). Appropriating Crane's observation to the present context, this is a network which enables these 'Singaperthians' to enjoy their 'new' suburban home, yet gives them autonomy to selectively, albeit consciously, re-engage with their diasporic 'homeland' and cultural 'centre'.

Three separate interviews were conducted with each respondent between March and April 2005 in three different but well-known suburbs of Perth: Victoria Park, Leeming and Applecross. For reasons of anonymity, the three respondents will be referred to as Interviewees #1, #2 and #3 respectively. Interviewee #1 founded an association in April 2004 which aims to link Singaporeans with Western Australians via the promotion of non-business activities in Singaporean culture, the arts, education and sports (SWAN 2004: 3). Interviewee #1 moved to Perth in 2003 and was, at the time of the interview (April 2005), a Public Relation/Risk Management Consultant. Interviewee #2 is a Script Consultant and a Media Studies lecturer at a local University in Perth. Prior to moving to Perth in 2002, Interviewee #2 was an award-winning scriptwriter, best known for his role in creating Singapore's first English-language situation comedy (sitcom) *Under One Roof*, with the Media Corporation of Singapore. At the time of the interview, Interviewee #3 was the Executive Producer of Five-Foot-Way Theatre Company and Performing Arts School based in Perth. Interviewee #3 was a Producer-Writer with Caldecott Productions International (part of the Media Corporation of Singapore group) from 1999-2000 before moving to Perth.

Similar open-ended questions were posed to all three respondents with the intention of eliciting open and honest responses.² The respondents were first asked to provide a brief personal identification, including their names, occupations and the organisation(s) they represent, as well as the duration of their sojourn in Perth thus far. Following which, the following five broad questions, not necessarily in chronological order, were posed to each of the respondents:

1. Perth has been described as "Singapore's southernmost frontier" by Susan Long of *The Straits Times*, or a distant suburb of Singapore that has been dubbed 'SingaPerth' (28 Sep 2003). Do you think this is an apt description of Perth?
2. Talk about your Perth-based organisation that relates to Singapore, and your reasons or motivations for setting it up.
3. Do you consider your Perth-based organisation a 'new' or 'creative' project?
4. Why did you leave home (Singapore) physically and then decide not to 'leave' by re-engaging with Singapore in this way?
5. Do you think the strengthening links between Perth and Singapore offer a good representation of the global world we live in today?

All responses were recorded on tape and subsequently edited and transcribed. The edited transcripts were then sent to the respondents to ensure that they presented a true and accurate reflection of their views. As it transpired, only minor amendments were put forward by all three respondents.

The section that follows – titled 'Singaperth: Creativity in the Suburban 'Frontier'' – considers the possibility of creative work and enterprise in the so-called 'frontier' and suburbanised landscape of Perth, and examines why it has become an attractive destination for such Singaporean emigrants. The remaining sections of this paper deal with the 'creative shift' in cultural globalisation by applying what Diane Crane (2002) refers to as the 'network flows' model of cultural globalisation. As I will go on to assert, the desire of this group of Singaperthians to form creative and cultural networks

² The respondents were briefed on the subject matter of this research project, as well as the range of possible questions, prior to agreeing to be interviewed. During the interview, the questions were posed, as much as possible, in an unobtrusive way – that is, as and when they fit into the flow of the interview. It is worth pointing out that in all three interviews, I was able to solicit answers for the key questions as all three respondents were interested in talking about their links with Singapore. I am grateful to all three respondents for their time and willingness to be interviewed, and for granting me permission to identify and quote their comments for this paper.

within a newfound 'frontier' community that would relate and extend back to Singapore makes it all the more important for us to understand, and continually rethink, cultural globalisation. Another way of phrasing this would be to ask: "Can a creative 'Singaperthian' truly exist?"

SINGAPERTH: MEDIATING CREATIVITY IN THE SUBURBAN 'FRONTIER'

The Perth metropolitan area is home to almost enough Singaporeans to form a constituency. Eight times the size of Singapore island, there are more than 10,000 Singaporeans here within the population of 1.3 million, a third of the total 33,590 in Australia. The actual number of Singaporeans [in Perth] is probably double the official figure, because the latter reflects only those who have successfully applied for permanent residency (Susan Long, Journalist for *The Straits Times* 2003a: 35).

In 2003, Singapore's flagship daily *The Straits Times* published a two-part feature on Singaporeans who have immigrated to Perth, Western Australia. Written by journalist Susan Long, the headline for the first article – 'Singaperth' – splashed across the front page of *The Sunday Times* on 28 September 2003 (Long 2003a: 1). The second part, published a week later on 5 October 2003, dealt with the downside of moving to Perth, and was thus entitled 'Not so Perthfect after all' (Long 2003b). In writing these articles, Long effectively documents a well-known aspect of Perth: that it is home to the largest number of the Singaporean diasporic community, including *inter alia* permanent settlers, transient workers, regular commuters, tourists and international students (Long 2003a: 35-6).

Based on the 2001 *Census of Population and Housing*, the Australia Bureau of Statistics reports that there are 10,234 Singapore-born Australian citizens and migrants living in Western Australia, with the vast majority of them living in the sprawling suburbs of metropolitan Perth (ABS 2001: 64).³ With more than 60,000 Singaporeans visiting Perth in 2004 (Kaur 2004: 15), and an estimated 3,000 Singaporeans choosing to study in Western Australia, Long's (2003a: 36) speculation that the actual number of Singaporeans in Perth "is probably double the official figure" (as cited in the opening

³ Although *The Straits Times* quotes from the same source (i.e. the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001), a slightly different figure of 10,270 Singaporeans in Perth was presented in Long's article (Long, 2003a: 36). This minor variation should be treated as immaterial since there is widespread belief that there are many more 'Singaperthians' who are unaccounted for by official statistics.

quote) is not unfounded. Indeed, such heightened human movement between Singapore and Perth led Singapore-based start-up airline Valuair to launch daily direct flights between the two cities from December 2004, adding to a busy route already serviced 28 times a week by the two national carriers, Australia's Qantas and Singapore Airlines (Kaur 2004: 15). Jetstar Asia's acquisition of Valuair in mid-2005, however, caused Valuair's Singapore-Perth route to be short-lived as it was axed by Jestar's parent company Qantas towards the end of 2005. Nevertheless, the allure of Perth as a travel and migration destination meant that the two-part 'human interest' news feature in *The Sunday Times* elicited a substantial amount of interests from Singaporeans – both in Singapore and Perth – to the extent that many continue to use the newly-coined terms 'Singaperth' and 'Perthfect' when describing the phenomenon and 'affect' of Singaporeans living in Perth (Velayutham 2004; see also Tan 2004).

Whilst attempting to offer a balanced assessment of Singaporeans residing in Perth, both articles are filled with clichés about Perth, as well as stereotypes about the cultural constructs of Singaporeans, some of which are invariably well-rehearsed. As Long puts it somewhat poetically in her first article:

[For] an ever increasing number of Singapore heartlanders, the sheer affordability of Perth has made it the land of second chances and new beginnings. They flock here to seek the perfect compromise: A different lifestyle, yet one which offers reassuring Singaporean resonances and the familiar comforts of home. Far away yet near enough to rush home in case mother is ill. A place to kick back yet still remain in the game (Long 2003a: 35).

The geographical proximity of Perth to Singapore – about 5 hours flight time – belies the well-circulated description of Perth as “the most isolated capital city in the world” (Tan 2004). Indeed, as Long (2003b) acknowledges, Perth is “actually closer to Singapore than to Sydney”, which explains why the West Australian city has been a popular holiday destination for Singaporean families, individuals and international students (see also Cho 2003).⁴ An additional reason which escaped mention by Long in her articles is that Perth

⁴ In November 2003, MediaCorp Publishing (the publishing arm of Singapore's national broadcaster, the Media Corporation of Singapore) published a special supplementary magazine entitled *A Perth-fect Life* in conjunction with its best-selling English-language entertainment magazine *8 Days*. Written and compiled by writer Karen Cho, this 34-page magazine was touted as “the definitive guide to studying and holidaying in Perth” (Cho, 2003: 1).

exists on the same time zone as Singapore, thus negating any fear or complaint of jetlag by travellers.

While within Australia, Perth – as well as the wider state of Western Australia – is often derided for its isolation and vast desert plains, many Singaporeans have grown to embrace the city either as émigrés or regular visitors. In August 2003, a *Straits Times* survey of 510 Singaporeans revealed that a quarter of Singaporeans would like an early retirement by moving overseas. Consistent with previous findings, Australia was the top destination for 43% of the respondents and the majority of these Singaporeans would prefer Perth (Yusof 2003; Sullivan and Gunasekaran, 1994). Although it has been dubbed 'Dullsville' by the authoritative *Lonely Planet* travel guide – to concomitantly deride and accentuate its 'laid-back' lackadaisical lifestyle (Tan 2004) – Perth has been described, with a mixture of positive and negative overtones, by Long as "Singapore's southernmost frontier" (Long 2003a: 35).⁵ When asked if this was an apt description of Perth, all three respondents gave positive but differing answers, although they concur that Perth is a suitable destination for Singaporeans wanting to preserve semblances of 'Singaporeanness' (see especially Interviewee #1). Interviewee #2 accepts this description readily, citing the ubiquity of the Singaporean accent as evidence Singaperth's existence, when he notes:

I've never doubted that Perth is like a 'constituency' of Singapore. It's almost just a matter of it not being drawn up as a legal voting block. If you walk into any shopping centre in Perth, anytime, anywhere, you'll hear the Singaporean accent. (Interviewee #2, Question 1).

While Interviewee #2 considers the Singapore accent as a marker of 'Singaporeanness', Interviewee #1 sees cultural familiarity, or "a network of people who can understand immediately when we talk about Sungei Road", and Singaporean food or "the gastronomic aspect" as more distinctive markers of Singaporean identity (Interviewee #1, Question 2). Nevertheless, Interviewee #1 accepts the 'frontier' tag with some caution,

⁵ In 2000, Philip Yeo, the prominent but outspoken chairman of Singapore's Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*Star) made a widely publicised controversial comment about Perth: "If Singaporeans can't make the grade, they go to Perth. You know what Perth is like? A very boring place." Although rejected by the majority of Singaporeans living in Perth, as well as Perth-bound Singaporeans, Yeo's comments have had the effect of making Singaporeans seeking a 'seachange' to Perth to think longer and harder about their plans (see Chua, 2005).

equating it with the myth of Singapore's hardworking and nation-building pioneers, alongside the 'tradition' of his culture and religion. As he expresses:

The 'southern-most frontier' description in my mind fits one category of Singaporeans who had their forefathers' pioneering spirit. And just like my grandfather [from India], who passed on his culture and religion to us, we do the same for our children, with the addition of what has been distilled from Singapore (Interviewee #1; Question 1).

The use of the term 'frontier' is seen as somewhat problematic because it tends to reflect physical landscapes and the notion of place. This 'problem' is identified by Interviewee #3:

I'm not sure that 'frontier' would be the right word to use. I do see Perth as a place full of potential for Singaporeans to come here, whether in terms of the arts, economic development, or for retirement and relaxation (Interviewee #3, Question 1).

To be sure, being on a 'frontier' would typically mean to reside on a borderland, especially one that exists "between a country and an area of wild, unclaimed land" (Sinclair, 1987: 585). In the Australian metropolitan imagination – as it is in most Western societies – the 'suburb' has become the bourgeois 'frontier' site that bridges the city with the country or, in the context of Australia, the 'bush' (Salusinszky 2005: 40; see also Jackson, 1985 and Fishman, 1987). It is a well-known fact that the vast majority of Australians live in a suburbia that is defined by large and grandiloquent stand-alone houses – known as bungalows to Singaporeans – on quarter-acre blocks of freehold land (Salusinszky 2005: 40; Long 2003a). Indeed, some of Australia's best-known and more successful cultural exports are television serials and soap operas that deal with everyday life in the suburbs, including *Neighbours* and, more recently, *Kath and Kim* (Jordan 2005: 24).

Although governments and city planners have over the past decade moved towards "urban consolidation" of houses in Australian capital cities in the name of 'sustainability', most evidently by increasing the built-up density of existing suburbs to prevent urban sprawl and to minimise pressures on key public infrastructure, the suburb remains a site and object of cultural affection for most Australians wanting to own and live in large houses on large parcels of land (Salt 2005: 40). Compared to the more costly and populous capital cities like Sydney and Melbourne, the dream of owning one's own

land in Perth is not considered out of reach for most working adults and families – although the mining boom that Western Australia has been experiencing from the early to mid-2000s has altered this status quo somewhat. For Singaporeans with “pent-up aspirations” to own landed properties, the highly suburbanised Perth with seemingly plentiful supply of land for housing becomes very appealing (Long 2003a: 36).

Whilst this paper is not particularly interested in the cost or type of housing, it is useful to highlight that one of the less-cited – though nonetheless well-known – attraction of Perth is its perceived lower cost of living (which tends to correlate with real estate values). This is alluded to by Interviewee #3 when she explains her personal preference for ‘Singaperth’:

For really basic reasons – I mean, compared to going to Sydney or Melbourne. Sydney is like another Singapore, while Melbourne is sort of turning that way too, I think. There’s still a blend of old and new [in Melbourne], but Perth, because it’s so new, it’s appealing to Singaporeans who always like to develop new things. We always like to be in the front, and pioneering opportunities for others, such that Perth naturally becomes, for me, a better choice than many other places (Interviewee #3; Question 1).

The description of Perth as “a place full of potential” (by Interviewee #3), coupled with its ability to embody the ‘pioneering spirit’ and opportunities of Singapore’s past (as mentioned by Interviewees #1 and #3 respectively), implies that the notion of ‘frontier’ is not merely confined to place or physical landscapes. Veritably, it can also refer to the boundary of a “new idea or knowledge” (Sinclair, 1987: 585).

I would argue that this definition of ‘frontier’ has much to do with the contemporary discourse of creativity, which is essentially about living and doing things “different[ly] from what has been done before” (Amabile and Tighe 1993: 9; see Leo and Lee 2004: 211). Richard Florida’s (2002) conceptualisation of a creative economy driven by a growing ‘creative class’ is predicated heavily on the ability to harness distinctive and innovative ideas from each individual with creative potential. For him, contemporary businesses seek to locate in places where clusters of creative people reside and where culture and the arts are vibrant (Florida 2002: 5-6). Although Florida explicitly favours the concept of a ‘creative clustering’ – that is the bringing together of likeminded individuals to generate mutual inspiration, as they tend to occur in big and developed

cities (Florida 2002: 8) – it is arguable in the case of Perth that it is precisely the obscurity and the concomitant blandness of suburban landscapes that spark innovative and creative ideas.

As I have noted in the introductory section, increased movement of people across borders coupled with the mass availability and use of ICTs have enabled the formation of new cultural and creative networks that no longer conform to a clearly defined centre or periphery (Crane 2002: 3). According to Crane, this 'cultural network' model of cultural globalisation acknowledges in essence that ideas and cultural influences can originate and flow from alternative and often unexpected sources, and not necessarily from a clearly defined centre (ibid.). So whilst interacting with likeminded creative individuals in 'creative centres' gives the creative class workers the "opportunity to validate their identities as creative people" (Florida 2002: 218), creative 'Singaperthians' are, metaphorically speaking, moving away from the centre and into the suburban 'frontier' to pursue their creative interests. This 'new' lifestyle is one that hinges on connectedness and proximity (the focus of the next section) for it requires constant communication and re-engagement with Singapore and its 'new' twenty-first century desire to nurture and 'industrialise' the creative industries (Leo and Lee 2004: 215; see also Lee and Lim 2004).

CULTURAL PROXIMITY/CREATIVE NETWORKS

The question of connectedness and proximity – both in geophysical and metaphysical (or cultural and creative) senses – is explored in Questions 4 and 5 of the interview. Question 4 – which asks: "Why did you leave home (Singapore) physically and then decide not to 'leave' by re-engaging with Singapore culturally and creatively?" – received possibly the most varied comments from the respondents. Interviewee #2, for instance, gives an utterly pragmatic reply when he declares: "Primarily for money, but also because my work has cultural currency, which also means that my work has economic value in Singapore" (Interviewee #2, Question 4). The nature of Interviewee #2's work as a scripting consultant, his established reputation within the media and the creative industries in Singapore, and the ubiquity and increased reliability of technological infrastructure, gives him the ability to 'telecommute' or work with his predominantly

Singaporean clients from his 'new' home in Perth – or indeed, to work away from 'home' (Ellison 2004).

Although Interviewee #2 defines globalisation as “technological congregation”, there is a strong cultural element here insofar as his creative work is highly valued and in demand. Despite the fact that such media and creative work tends to be content-based, and are “very specific to their local needs” (Interviewee #2, Question 3), his distance from the 'centre' of activity in Singapore appears to be culturally accepted or tolerated. In fact, he considers his absence from Singapore – which translates to his presence in Perth – a creative plus:

As for my work, being physically away from Singapore actually gives me a creative edge. Think about it: Oscar Wilde, James Joyce, you name it, all the great writers in the world, are all exiles or physically away from the place they write about. If you are too close to the picture, you can't write because you can't see the contrast anymore (Interviewee #2, Question 5).

It is therefore not surprising that Interviewee #2 speaks favourably – and almost nonchalantly – about the professed advantages of globalisation:

Globalisation can be about technological congregation. You don't need a geographical locality. My technological congregation is the section in my Palm Pilot which says 'showbiz', where all these people are wired into my email. Sometimes they would send me an email and say: “how are you doing? I haven't seen you for a long time.” They don't know where I am, but that is irrelevant. I mean, I'm in that 'hub', and it's an electronic 'hub'. It has nothing to do with geography at all. I see globalisation as essentially a utilitarian thing, particularly for the media and creative industries (Interviewee #2, Question 5).

I would argue here that the abovementioned “technological congregation” of people in an “electronic hub” is fundamentally a cultural trait since it epitomises the shift from an imperialist model of cultural globalisation to one that is based on multidirectional flows of creative ideas. In this 'cultural network' model, as Crane explicates, cultural globalisation “corresponds to a network with no clearly defined centre or periphery” (2002: 3).

For Interviewees #1 and #3, however, 'leaving home' and subsequently re-engaging with Singapore through their work and cultural pursuits seem to be sparked by a

combination of 'push' and 'pull' factors. In the case of Interviewee #3, a negative experience in her first job in Singapore after her undergraduate training provided the impetus to leave and pursue her own artistic cum creative venture. As she puts it:

I chose to leave Singapore [firstly] because I wanted to embark on a research on how Singaporeans behave, or our behavioural changes, when we are in Singapore and when we are overseas. [...] Secondly, from an artistic point of view, I went back to Singapore (after completing my undergraduate studies) hoping to find that the Esplanade have been built and that I could find a job there. But it was kind of delayed. So, in my old job, I started to feel like I was one in a million of corporate writers. I felt a bit handcuffed. Every time I presented a new idea, they would accept it, and then slowly try to mould me and manipulate me to write what they want. [...] That, in a sense, made me feel stifled (Interviewee #3, Question 4).

The attraction of Perth as a creative destination for Interviewee #3 is precisely the composite strength of the Singaporean diaspora: "there are so many Singaporeans here, I don't even feel like I'm away" (Question 4). As the Executive Producer of a fledgling Perth-based theatre company, which is unmistakably Singaporean by its name, 'Five-Foot-Way', Interviewee #3 appears very convinced that she is helping in the promotion and development of Singapore theatre by working away from 'home'. As she articulates:

In my case, I observe from the Australian point of view, because they understand that they do not know what's happening in Singapore and so cannot accurately comment on local [Singaporean] events or issues. That's what I'm trying to achieve here, in terms of helping Singapore theatre: do some shows here, get a varied collection of responses that we need, from Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans; and also, we'd like to do some cross-cultural acts as well, which fits in well with Singapore, because at the end of the day, we are global citizens. I've always said that we Singaporeans are global and hybrid citizens (Interviewee #3, Question 2).

Interviewee #1 – who founded the Singapore-Western Australia Network (SWAN) to bring together creative works and ideas of likeminded 'Singaperthians', and in doing so, create a new social and cultural network (Interviewee #2, Questions 2 and 3) – was somewhat of a reluctant migrant. As he puts it:

If you ask me, the push factors [to leave home] were personal, somewhat economic. It was never cultural, it was never any other. I wanted to be in a semi-profession that Singapore was not ready for. I saw the need to move on. After 2 years, if you ask me whether that was the right move, I'd think yes it was. I would not have got this chance in Singapore. So in a sense,

we were never prepared to leave home as such. Singapore will always be home in that way (Interviewee #1, Question 4).

As the founding president of SWAN, Interviewee #1 was able to manage his social adjustment to his new home and job in Perth, whilst maintaining strong cultural affinity not with Singaporeans as such, but with fellow 'Singaperthians'. When asked if he would consider SWAN a 'new' and 'creative' project, Interviewee #1 replied emphatically:

I think it is! I think the very objectives of SWAN are very creative. The thing is that we want to enrich the host country by maintaining our traditions and also enriching ourselves along the way. No doubt there would be an inclusion of other cultural traits into what we bring. That would be the strongest pull of SWAN (Interviewee #1, Question 3).

Although this statement bears strong elements of 'cultural protectionism', it is cognisant of the fact that culture does not stagnate but changes and hybridises with new temporalities and spaces (Tomlinson, 1997: 147). This, I would contend, is one of the keys to understanding the network model of cultural globalisation. SWAN, as a network of Singaporeans, Singaperthians and Western Australians, appears to reinforce the cultural network model by "increasing international dialogue, empowering [the Singaperthian] minorities, and building progressive solidarity" (Curran and Park 2000: 10, cited in Crane 2002: 9).

The formation of organisations like SWAN (by Interviewee #1) and the Five-Foot-Way Theatre Company (by Interviewee #3) are really attempts to capitalise on the cultural proximity between Singapore and Perth, as well as to mobilise Singaporeans in Perth to participate in informal networks and gatherings. Although the term 'network' – as employed in the SWAN nomenclature – is used in everyday-speak to refer to all levels of social and cultural interaction, I propose that the experiences of these recent Singaporean emigrants to Perth offer a glimpse as to how we may rethink cultural globalisation. As Crane (2002: 18) points out, the 'cultural network' model is useful for understanding the role of what she calls "regional culture" vis-à-vis global culture emanating from established cities and centres.

If Perth can be seen as Singapore's creative suburb or frontier, then it is possible for reversed cultural flows to take place (Crane 2002: 3). Under this model of cultural globalisation, one should expect that many 'Singaperthians' will be able contribute to

Singapore's new creative industries drive. However, there is a vital caveat in this model. In order for such creative and cultural exchange to take place, as Interviewee #1 opines, Singaporeans in Perth should claim their "Singaporean heritage" and be prepared to work with Singaporeans who remain in the 'homeland' or 'centre' (Interviewee #1, Question 5). Interviewee #1 also notes with cogency:

And on the part of the 'officialdom', I think they should 'get real' have a Singaporean Consulate. We have, I think, 20,000 Singaporeans running around Perth. It is a constituency by itself, one of the large constituencies. So not offering some of the official conveniences is just a bit of a shame. It makes people want to stay away from their Singaporean-ness. If we have that, we can share some of the joys. The scope and potential for closer exchanges, we've not even explored it really.

CONCLUSION: MEDIATING THE 'NETWORK'

[W]e should look up and find out what Singaporeans are doing here in Perth. A lot of the time, we'd think that Singaporeans are here for business migration or retirement. I think it sort of started out that way. A lot of people came here because Perth is quieter. They just want to retire here and play golf, have a farm, plant trees. Like I said, because of the potential it has been offering to Singaporeans, we may need to re-look at the reasons why people choose to come out here (Interviewee #3, Question 5).

In a 1991 Institute of Policy Studies research report on the motivations for Singaporeans to emigrate to Australia and Canada, two key reasons were cited as 'push' factors for Singaporeans who had moved to Australia (Yap, 1991). These were: the quality of children's education in Singapore (i.e. the high pressure and lack in developing creative thinking) (cited by 34% of respondents) and the socio-economic and political environment in Singapore (cited by 22%), summarised by investigator Yap Mui Teng as "regimented, unbalanced and over-dominated by work concerns, lacking in compassion and intolerant of failure" (Yap, 1991: 17). As the study further reveals, these factors were often precipitated by various personal fears, such as concern over the future security of Singapore and personal frustrations with jobs or businesses, which is partly true for Interviewees #1 and #3. Not surprisingly, the pull factors – better economic opportunities, educational opportunities and the socio-economic environment – corresponded quite neatly with the abovementioned push factors (Yap, 1991: 17).

Additionally, in the case of Australia, its proximity to Singapore has had a strong influential factor in attracting new migrants (ibid: 18).

In many ways, the notion of Perth as a Singaporean creative frontier resonates with Singaporean emigrants who desire "a different lifestyle" and see Perth as a "land of second chances and new beginnings" (Long 2003a: 35). Although a combination of pull and push factors are likely to be present in any decision to emigrate, Long's two-part article seems to suggest that while the blue skies of Perth beckons, many actually do so because they feel socially and politically restricted in Singapore. Many feel disenfranchised with life in a hectic and fast-paced city, or feel edged out of the profession they would prefer to be in. In 2005, an off-beat Singaporean film entitled *Perth* was screened on Singapore cinemas and theatres. The film is a story of a 51-year-old part-time security guard and taxi driver who desires to leave the fast-paced but antiseptic streets of Singapore for his paradise on earth in Perth, which he describes in the film as "the most beautiful city in the world" (Tay 2005; Lim 2005). Receiving mostly negative previews and reviews, *Perth* fared poorly at the box office, although the allure of Perth as the final destination in the minds of Singaporeans was duly acknowledged. By the same token, Singaporean political analyst Derek Da Cunha's has observed that rising emigration by Singaporeans to Australia is increasingly driven by push factors (Da Cunha, 1997: 102). As Long (2003a) opines in the conclusion to her first article: "what the new Singaporean migrant travels all this way in search of is not so much cheap land or spectacular sunsets but really, respect" – and I would add, respite from the rat race without bowing out of the work they enjoy. In this regard, the cultural proximity and familiarity of 'Singaperth' offers a way for such Singaporeans to create new 'cultural networks', without forsaking old ties with Singapore, and their Singaporean families and friends.

Although broad conventional understanding of globalisation is that the world has become so small that time, place and distances are no longer obstacles to communication and cultural exchanges, there are limitations that cannot be overcome by technology or other creative solutions. For instance, although the five-hour flight time between the two cities makes Perth a convenient place to 'set up shop', especially for a creative worker (like Interviewee #2) who would prefer to remain in close physical proximity to the

source of his creative inspiration, there are metaphysical distances that remain somewhat insurmountable. As Interviewee #1 puts it most succinctly:

I remember there was a United Airlines advertisement that once ran, very simply it said that you can't fax a handshake or email a smile. I think that while technology helps us to keep in touch across geographical distances, those are the human elements that would still be missing in a long distance relationship (Interviewee #1, Question 5).

Despite such limitations, the creative and cultural network models adopted by all three respondents appear to work reasonably well. After all, this is a network which enables these 'Singaperthians' to enjoy their 'new' suburban home and lifestyle, yet gives them autonomy to consciously and selectively mediate their diasporic 'homeland' and cultural 'centre'. This conforms well to the cultural network model of globalisation, which "offers an alternative conception of the [cultural] transmission process" (Crane 2002: 3). This is a network that recognises that in the era of globalisation, lifestyle choices are made by creative individuals as individuals and not necessarily as a collective 'creative class' (Florida 2002).

In conclusion, "can a creative 'Singaperthian' truly exist?" The answer would have to be a cautious 'yes'. As long as his/her 'cultural network' is able to continue to engage Singapore in an original and meaningful way, and in the process discover new 'frontiers' of creativity and knowledge, it can and should exist. Since cultural globalisation is, at the end of the day, about "the global spread of ideas and trends" (Kluver and Fu 2004), one can expect that it will continue to evolve and bring about "consequences that are difficult to predict" (Crane 2002: 19). This 'cultural network' of 'Singaperthians' residing in the Singaporean creative suburb of Perth will thus need to continually mediate its position and role vis-à-vis an increasingly global Singapore.

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